

'Tragedy': Coretta

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The family of the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. was saddened by the death of James Earl Ray yesterday — partly because it now fears it will never be sure who killed the civil rights leader.

"This is a tragedy, not only for Mr. Ray and his family, but also for the entire nation," Coretta Scott King said.

"We are more determined than ever to find the truth. It is regrettable that Mr. Ray was denied his day in court, but the American people have a right to know the truth."

The King family yesterday asked President Clinton and Attorney General Janet Reno to establish a Truth and Reconciliation Commission that would "grant amnesty and immunity from prosecution for all those who come forward with information."

"We intend to do everything we can to bring it to light," said the slain leader's wife. Ray's brother Jerry said he also would continue to

fight to clear his brother's name.

Despite persistent suspicions that Ray was part of a larger conspiracy — which may even have involved the federal government — to kill King, the courts repeatedly have concluded that Ray acted alone.

Ray's death brought a mixture of anger and regret among friends and followers of King.

Hosea Williams, a former King lieutenant and Southern Christian Leadership Conference executive director, said he thought the federal government was behind King's assassination and orchestrated Ray's guilty plea to keep the truth from coming out.

"I have as great a feeling for Ray as I have for King," Williams said yesterday in Atlanta. "Both deaths were in vain, a useless and cruel act of our federal government."

Some other civil rights leaders, including the Revs. Jesse Jackson and Al Sharpton, have said they believe Ray took part in the assassination but did not act alone.